

Like father like son: Philip II and Macedonian thuggery

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Alexander: hero or villain?

Alexander the Great of Macedon is a romantic figure who even in antiquity captured the popular imagination. In the second century A.D. the historian Arrian thought of him as a great general (and himself as the new Xenophon who would tell his story), while for a Roman writer named Curtius perhaps a hundred years earlier (and suffering from the tribulations of life under a king at Rome) Alexander was a lonely megalomaniac who had increasingly lost touch with reality.

Modern scholarship also has understood Alexander in different ways: as philosopher king, religious visionary, astute statesman or idealist living in a world of his own creating. Almost always the image of Alexander is of the hero – a new Achilles – who like his famous portrait by the Greek sculptor Lysippus directs his gaze upwards into the middle distance. More recently, however, analyses of Alexander have taken a different turn, and Alexander has been described as a cold, ruthless and aggressive military commander who was not squeamish about massacring whole populations in order to secure his purposes.

But however we understand him and however difficult the sources on Alexander might be to interpret, Alexander is a figure that we can picture in our mind's eye, and of whom we can at least attempt to form a character sketch. However, it was not Alexander who brought the Macedonians to greatness or originally conceived the Asian campaign, but his father, Philip II.

Philip's Macedon: a land of power and wealth

Philip is an altogether more shadowy figure than his son. During his reign, the state of Macedon changed from being a political backwater lying uncomfortably on the edges of the warring communities of the Balkans and the Greek cities to the south, to becoming the politically and militarily dominant state in the region. Although traditionally holding only the low country from the mountains to the coast between the Haliacmon and Axios rivers, during Philip's reign the Macedonians gained direct control over territories stretching from the Pindus range on the northern borders of Thessaly to Mount Pangaeum and Crenides (renamed Philippi by Philip in 356 B.C.) in Thrace, and a more loosely defined control over the Greek states to the south through the League of Corinth, a league of all Greek states (except Sparta) founded in 337 after the decisive victory at Chaeronea in Boeotia. Under Philip the Macedonian state was at its greatest. What kind of man was able to face the depths of political and military weakness and instability and to exert his will and authority such that he could effect so striking a transformation?

Philip would have had a privileged childhood. Although he spent a large part of his boyhood as a hostage, in Illyria and then in Thebes where he was said to have lived at the house of the great Theban general Epameinondas, as a child of the Macedonian royal family (though only the third son of his mother, and with three other half-brothers besides) Philip would have been surrounded by grandeur, high culture and wealth. Even when the kingdom was not at its height, there is evidence of remarkable wealth among leading Macedonian families, evidenced by the large houses and magnificent mosaics (proba-

bly of local craftsmanship but depicting Greek themes) at Pella, which was established as the principle Macedonian city at the end of the fifth century.

Poets, pots and parties

Indeed, the Macedonian court was influenced by its cultivated neighbours in the south (whom the Macedonians claimed as kinsmen through Heracles, though the Greeks were less sure), and traditionally patronised Greek arts. Archelaus at the end of the fifth century had cultivated poets, artists and actors from the south (Euripides, for example, had lived at the Macedonian court in the final years of the fifth century), and established Greek-style games and cults at Dium under Mount Olympus. Philip himself was immersed enough in Greek culture to appoint Aristotle of Stageira as tutor to Alexander, to build a very Greek theatre at Philippi, and to entertain at his court Greek actors (who also had other uses as message-bearers and emissaries).

The Greek states, however, were not the only influences on Macedon. Early in the fifth century, the Macedonian royal house had been connected by marriage with high-ranking Persians, and the Macedonian state had been subjected to some form of vassalage to the Persian King. Influences also came from eastern neighbours closer to hand, and Macedonian metal-ware (the Macedonians were said to have had metal-ware before the Greeks) in silver and gold resembles royal metal-ware from Thrace. The Macedonian elite were also buried richly in subterranean tombs, which resembled Greek temples in appearance but must have had a very different symbolic value and meaning.

The Macedonian symposium too differed from its southern counterpart. Among the Macedonian elite the symposium was meant for display and expressions of power (the larger houses at Pella have three or four richly decorated andrones around central peristyles). Although at the royal court the symposium could enable the king to consult his closest advisers and to test policy, it could also be a rowdy affair. The Macedonians were notorious for drinking unmixed wine (taken neat without water) – Alexander may have died as a result of over-indulgence – and Macedonian parties were known for their wildness (Alexander reputedly burnt the palace at Persepolis as a party trick, though he may in fact have had a more serious intention). We also have stories of tensions boiling over into violence under the influence of alcohol. Alexander certainly killed one of his closest friends in anger at the end of a drunken brawl, and Philip himself in a drunken rage drew a sword against Alexander at a symposium after his son insulted the uncle of Philip's Macedonian bride (though not without provocation).

Murder in Macedon

As a Macedonian monarch, Philip's life expectancy was not great. Constant vigilance was needed just to maintain Macedonian borders. Philip took the Macedonian throne on the death of his brother in battle against the Dardanians, and during his own reign rumours reached Greece that Philip had come to a similar unhappy end.

Death also came easily in the Macedonian royal household. Although the Macedonian monarchy had a period of relative stability in the later fifth century, between Archelaus' death in 399 and Philip's accession in 359 eight kings sat on the throne. Justin (who wrote in the 2nd or 3rd century A.D. a summary of the universal history written during the reign of August by Pompeius Trogus) claims that both Philip's brothers were assassinated by their mother Eurydice, and that she had also plotted against her husband, though the plot went astray because her daughter blew the whistle. While this story itself cannot be reliable (we know that Perdiccas died at the hands of the Illyrian Bardylis), the tone is appropriate. Philip himself had one of half-brothers assassinated, and tried to kill off the other two as he thought they might claim his throne. Olympias, the chief of Philip's seven 'wives' (though some may have been in fact no more than concubines) and Alexander's mother, had Philip's last wife, Cleopatra, and her daughter put to death, and Alexander may have been behind the assassination of his father in 336.

The lean, mean, Macedonian fighting-machine

Justin says that Philip was fond of war, that he was compassionate but duplicitous, and a careful strategist, and a shrewd and restrained man who could hide his anger. Although he claims that Alexander exceeded Philip in both his good and bad qualities, in fact Philip was no mean warrior. He developed the Macedonian phalanx, as well as the cavalry and light-armed units, so that his army was virtually unbeatable in the field though he himself suffered many wounds in battle (he lost an eye in the siege of Perinthus). He was also ruthless in his dealings with conquered peoples (Olynthus was destroyed completely and the inhabitants of Pydna sold into slavery), though he could also be shrewd: when the city was taken, the Athenian garrison in Methone was returned to Athens unharmed as a gesture of goodwill. He was wily in his dealings with others. He secured Amphipolis by lying to the Athenians about his intentions for the city. He also manipulated individuals for his own purposes, and was happy to use bribes in order to take cities. He was an astute politician, who used every weapon at his disposal (including marriage) to secure control first of a united Macedonian state, then Thessaly, and finally the Greek states as 'leader' (*hegemon*) of the League of Corinth.

Paving the way for Alexander?

Philip was battle-scarred, hard-drinking, and calculating, but was he also a ruthless thug? Demosthenes of Athens thought so – in fact he said he was worse than a barbarian and a tyrant. But Isocrates saw in Philip the salvation for Greece and a solution to its problems, exhorting Philip to rid Hellas of tyrants and to unite the Greek states by a war against the barbarian enemy. Able to act quickly (he ended the Sacred War without a battle), he was careful, thoughtful, and took the long view. Before attempting his Asian campaign, Greece was settled with care and patience as Philip waited for his chances, pulling back when things weren't going his way, seizing opportunities when they arose. Though what Philip's long view was is less clear. What did Philip want with Asia, and when did he conceive of the possibility? Part of Alexander's romantic appeal is that he wanted to rule the world (and was largely successful). It seems unlikely that Philip shared Alexander's visionary idealism in this regard. But Philip did not share Isocrates' vision either. Like others before him, he was probably more interested in Asian wealth than Asian territories.

Philip did not look dreamily into the middle distance. He had the gaze of a political realist. He was cold, calculating and ruthless, and knew what he wanted and was prepared to wait to get it. Having grown up among the cultured but violent realities of the Macedonian court, he was a man who knew how to use

violence but also how to hold his hand. His son Alexander, though more impetuous and less shrewd, was probably in many ways a chip off the old block.

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